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ABSTRACT

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MSC COMMON ROOM CONVERSATIONS: TOPICS AND TERMS

JOAN CUTTING (DAL)

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MSC COMMON ROOM CONVERSATIONS: TOPICS AND TERMS

Joan Cutting (DAL)

Abstract

This paper explores the difference between conversations of new acquaintances and those of established friends. Psycho- and sociolinguistic literature on the subject lacks a systematic grammatical and lexical approach to the analysis of distinguishing features. This paper describes a longitudinal study of the 1991-92 Edinburgh University Applied Linguistics MSc students' common room conversations investigating how the language of this discourse community changes over the duration of the course as the students' shared knowledge increases. The contextualisation cues to be examined in the full study are special terms and names, general nouns and verbs, exophoric reference, substitution and ellipsis. So far, only special terms have been analysed, and this paper discusses the trends revealed, pointing to areas requiring further exploration.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overall aim of the full study.

This paper describes the first step in a larger study that aims to analyse the way that the 1991-92 Edinburgh University Applied Linguistics MSc students' language was affected by their interacting over time through the MSc course. In the larger study I will concentrate on the effect of growing and changing knowledge areas on the language of the students, taking a pragmatic approach to the process of linguistic change. I have chosen to focus on certain grammatical and lexical features that depend for their meaning on knowledge of the situational context of the MSc course and interactions within its duration. I hypothesise that certain 'contextualisation cues,' to use Gumperz's (1982) term referring to linguistic features that contribute to the 'signalling of contextual presuppositions' (p.71), increase over time. These can be categorised as exophoric reference, substitution and ellipsis, special terms and names, and general nouns and verbs. My aim is to take a developmental view of the special language that evolves in this closed network group, in order to determine if the cues emerge over time in any particular order and how they relate to each other. I hope to show how the in-group's language could become increasingly inaccessible to an outsider to this MSc group as the number of implicit references to assumed knowledge areas grows. I aim to make a generalisable statement about the pragmatic nature and function of language of any group starting as strangers and becoming a discourse community, united by a common goal and interacting over an extended but defined period of time.

The first part of the present paper will begin by reviewing the literature on the language of social groups and the indicators of intimacy. Then individual hypotheses will be stated for each of the contextualisation cues to be examined in the larger study, and general hypotheses will be put forward to suggest how these cues might interrelate.

1.2 Specific aim of this step in the study.

The second half of the present paper will discuss results of analysis of special terms and other course-related terms used by the MSc students from the beginning to the end of the course.

2. Review of the literature

No study has followed through the interactions of a group of people as they become a discourse community, defined by its members' common goals, intercommunication mechanisms, particular genres and specific lexis (Swales 1990), to discover exactly how and when grammatical and lexical reference to shared knowledge develops over time as the assumed knowledge grows. Swales describes the academic class as forming a discourse community, but does not analyse how it forms:

> Somewhere down the line, broad agreement on goals will be established, a full range of participatory mechanisms will be created, information exchange and feedback will flourish by peer-review and instructor commentary, understanding the rationale of and facility with appropriate genres will develop, control of technical vocabulary in both oral and written contexts will emerge, and a level of expertise that permits critical thinking be made manifest.
>
> (Swales 1990:32)

Our MSc students fulfil Swales' criteria for a discourse community. They have the broadly agreed common public goal of passing the course; their mechanisms for communication are mainly face-to-face interaction, whether in tutorials or in the common room; these mechanisms they use to provide feedback, but also solidarity and relief from anxieties; they acquire a special lexis; they possess more than one genre (common room casual conversation is but one, with its two registers: course-related topics and non-course-related topics).

Some studies have described the language of social groups but they lack a suggestion of how exactly language changes to become the language of the social group. One of the best descriptions is that of Bernstein (1971): he lists the characteristics of restricted code, such as restricted lexical and syntactical alternatives, few subordinate clauses, metaphor, and says that they 'interact cumulatively and developmentally reinforce each other and so the effect of any one depends on the presence of the others' (Bernstein 1971:43), but gives no suggestion as to how this might happen. Our MSc students develop a restricted code in the sense that it is context-dependent and contains unspoken assumptions, just like that of the university students in Levy's (1979) study who talked about their selected course subjects in such a way that even the staff found it difficult to understand. The restricted code of our students in the Applied Linguistics common room contains elements of Bernstein's elaborated code: because of their

course experience, their language, in particular their lexis, can be rational and abstract.

Those sociolinguists and psycholinguists who have considered how assumed knowledge areas and language change over time interdependently, refer to the change in superficial terms. Gumperz (1982) is one whose work is especially relevant to my study. He acknowledges that 'exclusive interaction with individuals of similar background leads to reliance on unverbalised and context-bound presuppositions in communication' (p.131), and lists contexualisation cues such as prosodic features, formulaic expressions, sequencing strategies and lexis and syntax. Unfortunately, he does not explore the area of lexis, syntax and phonology in depth. Kreckel (1981) recognises the dynamic nature of in-group language formation yet makes no attempt to consider the process whereby the in-group language might be formed. She describes the language of university students in terms of product alone: it consists of 'a multitude of in-group codes, discipline specific and social group specific...taking discipline or group-specific knowledge for granted' (Kreckel 1981:36).

Tannen (1984, 1989), in describing the high involvement style of those who regularly interact, mentions interpersonal involvement signals such as playful routines, irony, allusion, reference to familiar jokes and assumptions, ellipsis, indirectness, tropes, and imagery, yet she does not examine the order of emergence of these signals over time or the relation between each. Thus it is a static rather than a dynamic description: there is no suggestion of the routes from low involvement to high involvement, of how to get from one stage to another.

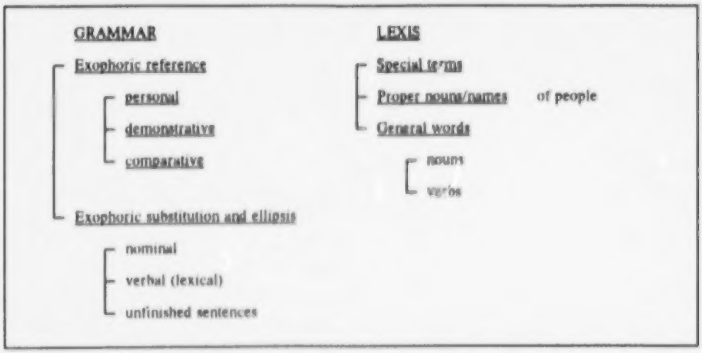
The present longitudinal study was undertaken to provide a systematic model for describing and hopefully predicting the process of language changes over time as individuals form a discourse community.

3. The study of cues: the full study

3.1 Hypotheses.

It is not only the background knowledge that can make a closed social network's conversations exclusive to an outsider to the group, but also the fact that the group members refer to that situational context in a particular way using contextualisation cues of reference, substitution and ellipsis, special terms and names and general words. Although the model of the cues in Figure (1) is my own, most of the classifications are Halliday's (1976). I hypothesise that as shared knowledge grows, the intertextual frequency and textual density of contextualisation cues increases and that the language of in-group members has more contextualisation cues than that of strangers.

Fig. (1) Contextualisation cues: indicators of in-group membership.



The shared knowledge I see as falling into five main areas which I classify as K1 to K5. K1 is general knowledge of the world, including Edinburgh and the University; K2 is general knowledge of linguistics and language teaching (fields, notions, names, etc.); K3 is knowledge of DAL and IALS organisation typical of any MSc year (courses, programme deadlines, projects, classes, staff); K4 is knowledge of this particular MSc year (specific tasks, specific study groups, particular books and articles, special ways of referring to courses, students); K5 is shared knowledge of personal details of the interlocutor, the interpersonal context (interlocutor's family and origin, characteristics and interests).

Topics in these five areas can be grouped in two macro-categories: course-related and non-course-related knowledge. K2 to K4 always contain course-related topics (henceforth 'c topics') and K5 always contains non-course-related topics ('n-c topics'). K1 is generally non-course-related, although K1 c topics (K1(C)) are ones related to the context of the course, such as how to run a computer programme that fulfills the needs of a certain project and how to go about converting to an M.Litt. or applying for an IALS scholarship.

I hypothesise that c topics will be more impenetrable to an outsider than n-c topics. I predict that with time, (K2 to K5) c topics will be more frequent than (K1) n-c topics, and that this will cause the conversations to have larger impenetrable sections because of the co-existence of not only the assumed knowledge area but also the greater number of occurrences of contextualisation cues.

I now state the individual hypotheses for each contextualisation cue. The first set of contextualisation cues is lexical: I hypothesise that there will be an increase in special terms (technical and course-related) as shared knowledge grows; that the percentage of special terms out of all nouns in K2-K4 will increase over time (see Section 4). Paradoxically, I also predict an increase in what I call general course-related terms, by which I mean count nouns usually with zero article whose precise meaning is not

clear since they are the first noun of a two- or three-word phrasal expression (Huddleston 1988:103) whose second/third word(s) (often a superordinate) is/are omitted. Thus their meaning varies from context to context.

e.g. OCT 25: 'Has anybody done their syntax?' (syntax tutorial task)

JAN 13: 'Are you going to stylistics?' (the stylistics lecture)

On the boundary between special terms and general words are superordinates. I predict an increase in superordinate course-related terms, substituting K2-K4 special terms, whose specific reference could be supplied by a pre-head modifier.

e.g. JAN 13: 'I'm not going to read the book again.' (the phonetics set book)

JAN 20: 'And the paper's due in next Friday.' (the core paper: the first project)

The second type of lexical contextualisation cue is that of proper nouns and names of people. Again, I hypothesise that there will also be an increase in a category of a general use of names of people which refer elliptically to something other than the people named, again as the first noun of a phrasal expression.

e.g. JAN 13: 'I haven't done any Chomsky.' (Chomsky revision or revision of materials about/by Chomsky)

Thirdly, I shall examine the lexical contextualisation cue of exophoric general words. I hypothesise that course-related words will be substituted increasingly by general words as K2-K4 grow.

e.g. JAN 13: 'I've done all the people.' (studied, thinkers)

Moving on to grammar, the fourth set of contextualisation cues to be analysed is exophoric reference. I predict an increase in the percentage of exophoric third person singular/plural existential pronouns and possessives out of all third person personals and an increase in demonstrative pronouns referring to course-related referents.

e.g. JAN 20: 'I mean you know what she's like. She's really fanatic.'

JAN 27: 'So I typed that thing up again after you'd gone.'

I predict an increase in the percentage of definite noun phrases on first mention: 'the' (non-generic) with special terms (K2-K4) and general nouns, out of all noun phrases.

NOV 7: 'So you've got the whole damn thing to do.'

I predict an increase in the percentage of exophoric comparative reference out of all comparative reference.

e.g. JAN 13: 'I feel more comfortable with the data stuff.'

The fifth set of contextualisation cues to be studied is exophoric substitution and ellipsis.

e.g. JAN 13: 'Which ones are you concentrating on?'

There will be an increase in the percentage of nominal exophoric substitution out of all substitution. Ellipsis can be seen in certain aspects of special terms, as I have shown. An extreme form of substitution and ellipsis is the unfinished sentence. I hypothesise that there will be an increase in sentences ending with a substitute such as 'etc.' or 'and so on,' and sentences which are left incomplete.

e.g. JAN 20: 'So that if you don't get it...'
'Heh heh heh heh.'

As all these contextualisation cues increase, there will be a decrease in post-head dependents (modifiers and peripheral dependents), a reduction in restrictive modification as the bald noun-phrase becomes all that is necessary to identify the referent. An outsider might feel the dialogues inaccessible because of the lack of post-head dependents.

e.g. MAY 12: 'Your CV and your proposal.' (outsider: 'for what?')

My general hypothesis about the contextualisation cues is that after the beginning of the course, there will be an increase in special terms but that as students become more familiar with them, they will use them more loosely and refer to linguistics and course-related referents in more general terms. That is to say, initially there will be a peak of special terms, proper names, demonstrative and comparative reference, combined with a drop in post-head dependents. As the course progresses, special terms and names will level off and there will be an increase in third person personals, exophoric substitution and ellipsis, and superordinates, general words and popular general expressions. This overall trend will be affected by events in the course: I predict minor increases in special terms around exam and portfolio dates and project deadlines.

To complete the study of cues and knowledge areas, I shall take into account two secondary but essential factors: cohesion and function. A consideration of cohesion will reveal that as reference, substitution and ellipsis become more exophoric, lexis more course-related and general, and post-head dependents scarce, the risk of communication breakdowns, or at least requests for clarification, increases. I foresee a greater increase in breakdowns and clarification requests in course-related topics than in non-course-related ones.

The analysis of the function of utterances containing cues is significant because, as Levinson (1978) has shown, claiming common ground and in-group membership, referring to a shared situational context, has a social cohesive effect. The interactional utterances may be a sociable but serious exchange of information to enlighten or an anxious test of the normality of a situation, or they may be a light-hearted relieving of tension with conversational implicature, flouting the maxim of quality, amusing colleagues with joking, irony and banter and interest-holders such as hyperbole and metaphor. I hope to show that the use of contextualisation cues is a generally expected unmarked means of claiming in-group membership.

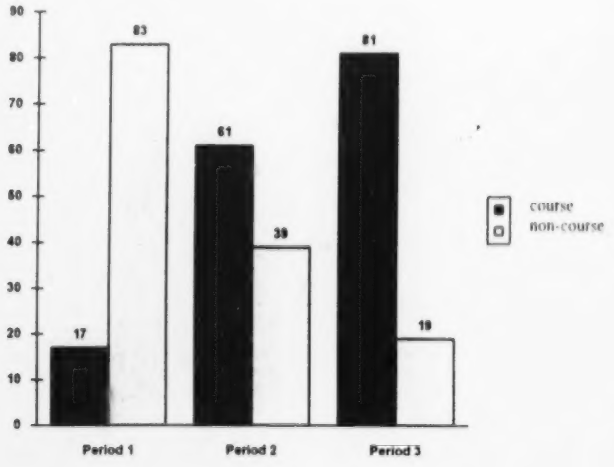
3.2 Method of data collection.

I openly made tape-recordings (total 264 minutes) of MSc student conversations in the common room of the Applied Linguistics department from 4 October 1991 until 12 May 1992. I recorded once a week for the first half of the first, second and third terms. The conversations were spontaneous and unguided, and I kept at a distance at the moment of recording so as not to be included. Six native speaking students who had options in common and tended to sit together in the common room consistently were eventually selected for analysis.

I chose three-minute segments from dialogues in which the greatest number of the six selected students took centre stage together in order to make comparisons easier and more systematic.

Before analysing individual contextualisation cues in these three-minute segments, it was necessary to check that the segments were a representative sample of the c topic: n-c topic ratio of each period. To do this, I calculated the time spent talking on c and n-c topics within each recording, and Figure (2) shows this percentage as an average per period. There is a noticeable increase in c topic time and decrease in n-c topic time. Finally, I calculated the average percentage for each topic type per term in the three-minute segments, and found that the ratio was similar enough to that for all recorded material for any observations about cues to be representative of all the recorded data.

Fig. (2) Average percentage, per period, of time in all recorded data on course and non-course topics.



4. The study of special terms

4.1 Data analysis.

The first problem that arose was that 'special terms' was an inadequate heading, as many terms were not intrinsically 'specialised' but became specialised by their context. It was their pragmatic reference and the previously established schemata that determined which topic type the term belonged to, which K area was being tapped. Thus, for example, I began to feel the need to accept terms such as 'discussion' on one occasion because it was about research methods, and 'this week' on another because it referred to activities in part of the course. However, accepting these terms, which are not intrinsically specialised, seemed to be diluting my argument about an increase in special terms.

I therefore re-defined my 'special terms' categories. Within the macro-category 'special terms' I made four divisions. I now adopted the name 'technical terms' for the category of intrinsically specialised terms independent of context, technical words of linguistics and language teaching such as 'discourse,' 'creoles' and 'lesson plan.' Then I devised a 'c term' category for terms only specialised by context, but intrinsically course-related: 'specific c terms' for ones such as 'core project,' 'portfolio' and 'topic sheet,' 'general c term' for 'syntax' as in 'how's your syntax?', and 'superordinate c term' for the likes of 'book' as in 'have you read the book?' Then I made a second category, 'c-cxt term,' for those terms that are not intrinsically course-related but become course-related by their context, such as 'discussion' and 'this week.' All other terms were obviously 'n-c terms,' or non-course-related, not even by context. Figure (3) shows each knowledge area with the hypothesised principal types of term that are mostly found in it, by definition. This is not to say that the other types cannot occur in each knowledge area, of course.

Fig. (3) General tendency of terms in each knowledge area.

	Special Terms				C-cxt Terms	N-c Terms
	Technical Terms	C Terms				
		Specific	General	Superord.		
K1						X
K1 (C)					X	
K2	X					
K3		X	X	X		
K4		X	X	X		
K5						X

The second problem that arose was that counting terms in spontaneous spoken data is not so straightforward as counting terms in written data. Because spoken data is interactive and unplanned, the same term may be repeated several times.

e.g. MAY 12: DM: Are you talking about a project?
AF: Yeah.
DM: You're talking about a project.
AF: I'm talking about a project.

Speakers repeat interlocutors' words to show solidarity, check comprehension and

negotiate meaning. They repeat their own words as they hesitate, think what they are going to say and reformulate their own ideas. I decided to count each occurrence of a noun, even when the same noun was repeated in quick succession as a stutter, because it was difficult to formulate an non-arbitrary rule for counting a repeated word as one, two or three, and I felt that the overall distribution of nouns would not be unbalanced by counting every occurrence. This point is especially important to remember when I measure density.

The third problem was that it was obvious that if c topics themselves become more frequent at the expense of n-c topics, then this should affect the total number of special terms, and that it was not so much the number or frequency of certain terms but in fact their lexical density that might change with time. I therefore also calculated lexical density within each topic type (course-related and non-course-related). Expressions containing 'thing' and proper nouns were not considered, at this stage.

4.2 Results and discussion

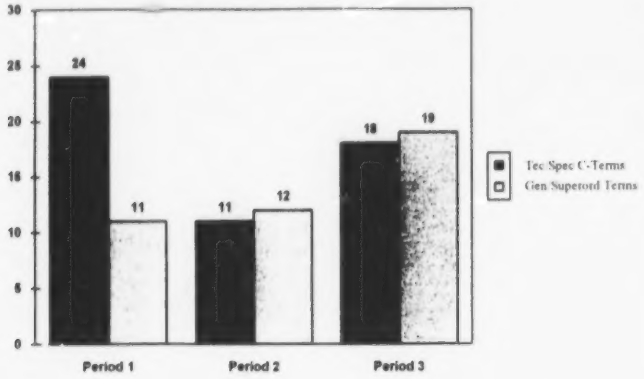
The total number of special terms is shown in Figure (4). The number in the last period was slightly greater than that in the others, probably explained by the increase in c topics time in that period. There were twice the number of total K3 and K4 c terms than K2 technical terms.

Fig. (4) Total number of special terms in K2, K3, and K4.

Period	K2	K3	K4	TOTAL
Oct/Nov	3	2	30	35
Jan/Feb	4	17	8	29
Apr/May	10	24	5	39
TOTAL	17	43	43	103

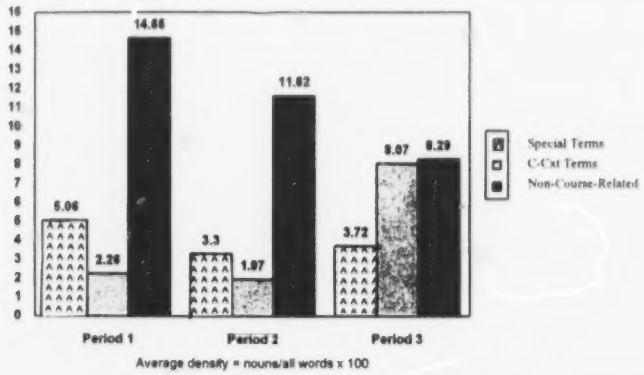
In order to discover how each special term increases or decreases over the three periods recorded, I examined each of the four categories individually over time. Figure (5) lays out these developments over time graphically and shows that there are more technical and specific c terms at the beginning of the course and more general and superordinate c terms at the end. This suggests that my hypothesis is confirmed but it may not be a very reliable calculation given the size of the sample. The same calculations would need to be made with all the recorded data for this to have more significance. Whereas all special terms in K2 are simply technical ones, special terms in K3 and K4 can be any of the c term types. In K3, they are as often specific c terms such as 'reading week,' 'PhD' as superordinate c terms such as 'class,' 'option,' 'project.' About 20% are general c terms and in all cases they refer to courses: 'language and linguistics,' 'psycho-linguistics.' K4 contains fewer superordinates (e.g. 'group,' 'questions,' 'books') than K3 does but the same number of general c terms, and these are in-group names and abbreviations such as 'Psycho', 'Teap,' etc.

Fig. (5) Totals of special term types for each period.



I then calculated the density of special terms and c-cxt terms in c topics and the density of n-c terms in n-c topics. By density, I mean the percentage of nouns of a particular type out of all the words in one topic type. Figure (6) shows that while special term density remains constant, c-cxt terms increase in density. The density of n-c terms in n-c topics decreases, suggesting that while knowledge assumed in the course context is soon established, it takes longer for n-c topic knowledge to be taken-for-granted.

Fig. (6) Average density of various term types per period within each topic type.



Average density = nouns/all words x 100

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Finally, all these calculations must be seen against the background of the discoveries made about the increase in time spent on course topics mentioned in 2.2.2. The inaccessibility of the dialogues may well be because of the greater proportion of time spent on course topics with a consistently low lexical density of special terms, which are themselves increasingly general.

4.3 Further research

It is clear that this analysis should be applied to all the recorded data, as the three minute segments do not contain enough examples of each type of term for the results to be reliable. Two more quantitative tests need to be done with special terms. The first is to observe how they behave intertextually, how they thread through the various dialogues over the whole year. The second is to examine the rest of the noun phrase: whether it is definite or indefinite, how it is modified, etc., to discover how the terms are actually used.

What now need to be examined more closely are other factors affecting the use of special terms. One obvious factor is that of deadlines within the structure of the course programme. There appears to be an increase in technical and specific c terms around exam-time and the dates for handing in projects.

In addition, special terms need to be analysed from a qualitative and functional point of view. Questions to be examined are: are special terms used as a marker of group identity, as a demonstration of in-groupness, of solidarity with interlocutors? Or are they used to test whether the progress of others is the same as that of the speakers? Technical terms are used relatively little in the common room: how do interlocutors react to those who use them freely? The function of the use of in-group language cannot be readily determined in a satisfying way. As an initial step, I shall attempt to carry out a bottom-up survey, classifying each discourse unit in terms of speech acts and moves. In the pilot study, triangulation interviews with recordees elicited global macro-functional comments of an unquantifiable nature.

Finally, the question of how to measure inaccessibility to outsiders, impenetrability of conversations, needs examination. I have devised questionnaires based on four of the recorded dialogues. The questionnaires contain questions of general comprehension (knowledge) and specific understanding of isolated words (contextualisation cues). Those who fill in the questionnaires will possess one or more of the five knowledge areas: that expected of a non-language teacher, that of a member of staff of the department of Applied Linguistics, that of the MSc students recorded etc. I hypothesise that those closest to the 1991-92 MSc group will best be able to unravel the reference of contextualisation cues and that this makes the conversations penetrable.

5. Conclusions

This paper has suggested a model for analysing changes in casual conversations of students as they form a discourse community. Beginning with the observation that the literature on the difference between the language of strangers/acquaintances and that of friends does not describe the process of passing from one stage to the other, this paper has offered hypotheses of a lexical and grammatical pragmatic nature.

The second part of the paper has consisted of a brief exploration of the first of the lexical hypotheses: that special terms increase, or rather that technical and specific course-related terms increase at the beginning while general and superordinate course-related terms do not emerge and increase until the second period of recording, that is, half way through the course, when assumed shared knowledge about the context of the course has grown and reference to it needs to be less explicit.

Once all the hypotheses have been tested and seen together, cohesion and function examined, and a statement about group formation made, I hope to explore the pedagogical implications. There is still a need for courses to train learners to guess what exophoric reference, substitution, ellipsis and general words might refer to, taking into account that even native speakers have difficulties with such reference. This approach could be particularly useful for EAP students, as it might help them to understand and participate in conversations between native speakers of English in their departments. Using the information that this study should produce about the relationship between grammatical and lexical cues and about which are most frequent in what type of knowledge area and for what function, materials could be devised to train learners to use bottom-up procedures to use the special lexis, terms and names to build up their own picture of a possible presupposition pool of contextual knowledge, and then from there to use top-down procedures to guess what part of the schemata the general words, reference, substitution and ellipsis might refer to.

Learners could also be trained to ascertain whether a dialogue is between strangers or between in-group members of a discourse community, by looking for the cues. They could also be trained to appreciate whether in-group members have recently entered the community or whether they have been in for longer, by looking for general and elliptical expressions.

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